

HOME-GARDEN

Puppy-proofing your garden: How to share your garden oasis with pets

Grace Elton Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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I've learned a lot about gardening from my dog. When I brought home my 12-week-old rescue puppy, Timber, 10 years ago, I quickly realized that my garden was no longer my own. It was now a shared space with a furry family member who often had different objectives for the garden than I did.

The first thing that Timber taught me was that I needed to prioritize the plants in my home garden. As a professional horticulturist who certainly brings my work home with me, I am addicted to plants. They can be native or exotic, hardy or tender, but the more unique the better. The problem with my plant addiction is that every plant in my yard is varying degrees of precious to me and it is a tragedy if any of them are harmed. Enter the puppy — the new family member who digs with reckless abandon and runs at full speed to catch a frisbee with little regard to what plant she is crashing into in the process. What I've learned? Protect certain spaces where you can maintain those specimen plants you love and plant the most resilient plants in the frisbee catch-zone. Shrubs are the best bet for durability, but I also have a love for hostas, with about two dozen different varieties in my yard that have done very well standing up to trampling.

Timber also has taught me that the layered garden I'm creating is also an ideal habitat for urban wildlife. We have a small, urban lot in Worcester, and we routinely see many species of birds, squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons, skunks, opossum, rabbits, and even foxes passing through our yard. Keeping both Timber and the wildlife safe is always top of mind. We have had a few early morning run-ins with skunks, so now I remember to check the yard as much as possible before letting her outside when it is dark out. We also try to spend as much time as possible outside in the early spring to discourage rabbits making nests. Inevitably we always end up with one or two that Timber finds for us. We keep the baby rabbits protected

by always being in the yard with Timber and keeping her away from the areas where we have found nests.

I also pay careful attention to the types of plants that I'm planting and the materials that I'm using to keep Timber safe.

As I'm sometimes planting lesser-known plants, I take time to research what I'm planting to make sure it isn't known to be poisonous to dogs. I also research any soil amendments and mulches for pet safety. A few pet-safe mulch alternatives include pine bark, shredded hardwood mulch, partially decomposed shredded leaves, and pine needles.

Putting gardening tools and accessories away is also key in keeping dogs safe. When Timber was a puppy, she loved to chew and swallow plastic plant pots, especially the thin plastic liners from annuals. We quickly realized that we needed to gather and store plant pots right after planting to keep her away from them.

One of the most important things that Timber has taught me is that our backyard is another room of our home, and spaces should be created for all family members to use, including pets. Honestly, this one is hard for me to accept, at times. My husband is the one who keeps me from digging up all of the grass to create bigger garden beds. His argument is that although tending grass is, in general, an unsustainable practice, we have a very active dog, not to mention a very active three-year-old, who both run and play on the grass, so we need to maintain just the right amount of turfgrass for them — for now. Ultimately, patience is the practice of gardeners!

Gardening Central Mass. is written by New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and other Garden experts. Located on 200 acres in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.

